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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experimental implementation of BIROS (Bibliographical Information Retrieval Online Service) in the Lancashire Public Library. The project is designed to provide information on the potential use of an online service for the general public, with particular regard to professional and technical users; the implications for public libraries of operating such a service; and the implications for library school teaching. A discussion of the goals and expectations of the service, which provides access to the major commercial online systems and databases, is followed by descriptions of the preparation phase and the first seven months of a 12-month operational phase. Components of these phases include training, staff orientation, publicity, demonstrations, policies for charging fees and handling requests, and evaluation of the search activity. An assessment of the search service by the first 56 users is included. (Author/SW)

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ONLINE SERVICE IN A PUBLIC LIBRARY

--THE LANCASHIRE EXPERIENCE

by

John Convey

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ONLINE SERVICE IN A PUBLIC LIBRARY – THE LANCASHIRE EXPERIENCE

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Keywords: Public Libraries, Online, Information Retrieval, Lancashire, BIROS.

Abstract: The paper describes an experimental online information retrieval service which has been introduced into The Lancashire Library - a public library in the United Kingdom. The origins and philosophy of the Service, named BIROS (Bibliographical Information Retrieval Online Service) are covered, followed by a detailed description of the preparation phase, and the first seven months of a twelve month operational phase, including sections on training, staff orientation, publicity, demonstrations and searching. An assessment of the Service by the first fifty-six users is included.

1 ORIGINS AND AIMS

The establishment of an experimental online service in the Lancashire Library was the result of an approach to that Library by the Department of Library and Information Studies, Manchester Polytechnic, with a proposition whereby the Library would set up, staff and run an online service, while the whole project would be monitored, and extensive research carried out, by the Department. The Library, which was favourably disposed to online systems and cognisant with their capabilities, readily agreed and the Department made application to the British Library Research and Development Department for assistance by way of finance and equipment. The British Library Research and Development Department, which has done much in recent years to promote the use of online systems, awarded a grant in June 1978. The Library and Leisure Committee of the Lancashire County Council resolved, at a meeting on 12th January 1978, that approval in principle be given to the participation, by the County Council, in this joint research project with the British Library and Manchester Polytechnic.

The project aimed to provide information on: the potential use of an online service for the general public, with particular regard to professional and technical users; the implications for public libraries of operating such a service; and the implications for library school teaching.

Initially, the grant was awarded for a period of eighteen months from June 1978 to December 1979, but this has since been extended to 31st March 1980. This time scale has allowed for a Preparation Phase of about six months and an Operational Phase of a full year: it is hoped that the Service will continue after that period as a permanent service additional to those already being offered by the Library.

9.8

2 THE LANCASHIRE LIBRARY

The Lancashire Library is a large, diffuse public library system serving a population of 1,384,000 from 135 service points. The Library is arranged in fourteen Districts, which include many former County Boroughs, or Boroughs, before the reorganisation of local government in 1974, which still retain a certain degree of authority over library matters although the County Council has overall control of the library service. County Library Headquarters holds a central collection of bibliographical tools, and requests for information which cannot be answered at District level are put through to Headquarters, which also has an established Technical Information Centre serving the whole library service. Lancashire is a county of variety, ranging from the business and principal local government centre of Preston to the industrial Districts of Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale, to the tourist centres of the west such as Blackpool; and large areas of the County are given over still to agriculture. The County includes a number of establishments of higher education.

3 INITIAL DECISIONS

The intention was that the new online service, known as BIROS (Bibliographical Information Retrieval Online Service) would be another resource to complement the existing indexing and abstracting services held by the Library in hard-copy - many of the subsequent searches being done both online and manually - but that at the same time BIROS would be actively promoted. This promotion would also give the opportunity to publicise existing services, particularly those providing technical information, mainly from Headquarters and Burnley. It would not be a wholly 'on-demand' service, the librarian using his or her professional judgement as to whether the request was suitable for an online search, a manual search, or both.

It was expected that the subjects requested via BIROS would be wide-ranging in content and to allow for this it was decided to use all the main online systems available at the time in this country, namely: Lockheed DIALOG, SDC ORBIT, British Library BLAISE, European Space Agency IRS, and the New York Times Information Bank; other systems would be used where appropriate as they became available. In order to use the Service to the full and to give the user as comprehensive search as possible within the prevailing financial restraints, multi-data base searching was likely to be the norm rather than the exception, and searching was to be data base-orientated rather than system-orientated. The aim was to create a new and also extended market for information within the ambit of the public library to encourage new and existing users to ask questions of the Library they would not previously have asked, and to interest them in sources which had hitherto been unavailable.

A prime consideration was the involvement of library staff at all levels of the Library Service and a comprehensive induction programme was planned and carried out in the Preparation Phase, with information being disseminated later about the course of the project.

4 PREPARATION PHASE

Staffing and Training. The Lancashire Library appointed a system librarian in a full-time post to set up and run the online service. It was recognised very early, however, that the librarian - known as the

Computerised Information Retrieval Service's Librarian - would need a small team of library staff to help with the searching, particularly at those times when active marketing of the Service was taking place. Currently, in addition to the CIRS Librarian, there are five intermediaries, two from the Headquarters Lending and Reference Service, one from the Request Service, one from the Technical Information Centre and the Computer Development Officer. Research duties are carried out by a full-time Research Assistant appointed by the Department of Library and Information Studies, Manchester Polytechnic. There are also Project Leaders for both the Library and the Department.

Initial basic training of the intermediaries was conducted by the CIRS Librarian in-house in the Lockheed, IRS, SDC and the British Library systems. Later, sessions looking more closely at data bases in a particular subject area, e.g. medicine, were held in-house, often after one of the intermediaries had attended an external course of such a nature.

Demonstrations and Publicity for Members of Library Staff. An important part of the Preparation Phase was informing the professional staff within the Library about online searching in general and about the proposed working of the BIROS Service in particular. The initial approach was to give an outline of the Service and a demonstration of online searching to staff at Library Headquarters, and also in the three Districts of Burnley, Preston and South Ribble, where the promotion of the Service was to be concentrated in the early stages. However, once the decision had been made to begin the public service on January 1st, 1979, it was important that all the professional librarians in all the other Districts had the opportunity to attend similar demonstrations before the Service became public. During November and December, therefore, further demonstrations to staff were given in the remaining eleven Districts; by Christmas altogether about 160 librarians had attended online demonstrations. Often real enquiries from users were searched during the 'live' part of the demonstration as examples.

Other Demonstrations. Two important demonstrations were given in this period: the first to the Library and Leisure Committee of the County Council who had given their approval for the project to take place; and the Management Team of the County Council. Demonstrations to other groups of interested persons other than librarians were not actively sought during this Preparation Phase, but a number of people did show interest in BIROS and it was deemed appropriate to give demonstrations at this time to reinforce their interest. Eight such demonstrations were given, including one for BBC Television which resulted in a short news item about BIROS appearing on 'Nationwide' on Thursday, 30th November, the day of the demonstration to Committee. A full page feature on BIROS appeared the same day in the 'Lancashire Evening Post', whose reporter had earlier attended a demonstration. From November plans were made for public meetings to demonstrate BIROS; these meetings would be arranged for the New Year. The District Librarians compiled lists of the main organisational users of their libraries, and these users were invited by the County Librarian to attend a meeting where the new online service would be demonstrated and other library services publicised.

Searches. Although the BIROS Service did not become public until January 1st, 1979, it was used for searching in the Preparation Phase in addition to its use for training and demonstration purposes. As mentioned previously, there is an established Request Service in the Lancashire Library, whereby requests which cannot be answered at District level are sent through to the Headquarters Library where the bibliographical sources are greater. On a number of occasions these queries could not be answered manually and recourse was made to online searching. During the period September to December, 35 of these queries were conducted online, or about 3 per week.

Charging. The question of which charging policy to adopt was discussed at length throughout this Phase until the decision was made by the Library and Leisure Committee on 19th October 1978. It was resolved that there would be no charge for the first search by each user; there would be a flat rate charge of £5 for each subsequent normal search; that in the case of exceptional searches, the County Librarian be authorised to charge the actual cost incurred; and that there should be no charge for County Council Departments. This position was to be reviewed after twelve months.

Research. The research during this Phase, in addition to monitoring all the foregoing, included: measuring the information demand on the Request Service; evaluating the training and demonstration sessions for staff; making early plans for a user survey of all users of the reference servicer and non-fiction requests in the lending sections of five principal District libraries of Blackpool, Burnley, Preston, Lancaster and Blackburn.

5 OPERATIONAL PHASE

Beginnings and Publicity. The BIROS Service, which became public on January 1st, 1979, began quietly, the main demand being expected once the publicity drive got under way. The main form of publicising the Service to potential users was by means of demonstrations, with brochures and posters being produced to reach a much wider section of the community. Organisational users of the Library in a particular District were invited to attend a meeting when the services offered by the Library, principally those in the technical field, would be explained, with particular emphasis on, and including a live demonstration of, BIROS. The people invited to the public meetings were representatives from organisations who were known users, either of the public library in their locality or of the Headquarters Library. The great majority were from business and industry, but also often invited were representatives from local government, and the health authority - but in some cases the latter two were catered for by separate meetings. The number invited to the District meetings was normally about 40 - 50, and those accepting the invitation ranged from about 55% down to about 5% of those invited. The aim was initially to hold meetings in Burnley, Preston and South Ribble, as the Service was to concentrate on these three Districts in the early stages; this policy was reviewed in February and the decision made to hold similar meetings in the other Districts, so that by the end of May meetings had been held for all the Districts of Lancashire.

Simultaneously with these demonstrations for the public, others were being held for more homogeneous groups such as health personnel, staff in academic institutions, firms and local authority departments.

The format of all these demonstrations normally followed this course: an explanation of the type of information that could be obtained online; an explanation of where the information was coming from and who produced it; an explanation and demonstration using a cassette recorder of how one searched for the information; and finally an online search, normally using a real enquiry from the attendees as an example. A demonstration would normally last for one and a half to two hours. The total number of demonstrations held between January and July (the time of writing) was 46, and the total number of attendees about 660 - this number includes some library staff; this figure gives an average of about 14 - 15 per meeting; the practical problems of demonstrating to such a large number were overcome by the use of a large monitor screen. A total of 64 real enquiries were searched during demonstrations in this period.

The press were often present during the demonstrations and consequently there were reports about BIROS in most of the local newspapers in Lancashire, such as the 'Ormskirk Advertiser', the 'Burnley Express' and the 'Leyland Guardian'. Accounts appeared in the professional library journals and the CIRS Librarian was interviewed for Radio Blackburn.

A main source of publicity was obviously the library staff in day to day contact with their regular users, when they could see the opportunities and advise their users of the occasions when BIROS might be able to help with an information need.

The Search Request. It was realised early that a major potential problem in providing an online service in a large public library system could be the transmission of the precise information need from the user to the intermediary in an accurate manner. It would not always be practicable to interview the user personally, so a Search Request Form was designed so that the user, with the help of the local reference librarian if necessary, could give detailed information about the subject of the search. The majority of enquiries were initiated in this way and 11 were asked for over the phone. However, the Service was not as impersonal as it might seem for in nearly 45% of enquiries the intermediary was in contact with the user, either personally or by phone, and was therefore given the opportunity to discuss the subject of the enquiry, in addition to having the information on the form. In 13% of cases the user was present during the online search.

Searches. The total number of enquiries during the period January to July 1979 was 239. This figure includes: (a) 133 requests specifically for computer searches; (b) 42 requests from the Request Service, and; (c) 64 enquiries searched during demonstrations.

(a) There was a steady rise in demand over this period, so that by June about 7 enquiries per week were being received. In nearly 16% of these enquiries, manual sources were used as well as online sources; and, in addition to the 133 requests, a further four were performed completely using manual sources. All but one of these enquiries was in connection

with the user's work, even where the user approached the Library as an individual and not as someone affiliated to an organisation. Table 1 shows that the source for the largest number of searches was academic institutions. The Service was also attracting requests from business and industry, but the response from the health services was considered poor.

Table 1

Sources of BIROS Requests - January-July 1979

Source	Number of Requests	Percentage
Business & Industry	24	18.04
Health Services	7	5.27
Private	21	15.78
Local Government	15	11.28
Academic	66	49.63
	133	100.00

In the early days of the public service when some of the intermediaries still had little experience in online searching, the time spent online for each enquiry averaged about 25 minutes, but by June the average time had fallen to about 22.5 minutes, and was under 20 minutes in July. An enquiry was normally searched on more than one data base, and on average over the period 3.58 data bases (not including the default file and including a split data base (e.g. INSPEC on Lockheed or SDC) only once) were searched for each enquiry, with a range from 1 to 13. The average cost for these enquiries over a six month period was £16.85 (the average for the latest month for which figures are available i.e. June was £14.80) excluding inland telephone charges. Some idea of the subject areas in which requests for information were made can be obtained from the statistics of data bases used. Taking into account all online searching, seventeen data bases were used for more than one hour in the six month period January to June, the eleven most used being: (percentage of total use in brackets) ERIC (20.58%), MARC (11.73%), MEDLARS (11.01%), COMPENDEX (7.48%), INSPEC (5.97%), CHEMICAL ABSTRACTS (4.97%), CAB ABSTRACTS (4.33%), BIOSIS (4.26%), PSYCHOLOGICAL ABSTRACTS (2.26%), ABI/INFORM (1.82%), PROMPT (1.82%); in addition there were 58 other data bases used, giving a total of 69 different data bases. ERIC was the default file on the system used most - Lockheed DIALOG. Some examples of subjects were: biodeterioration of cutting oils; the logical bases of scientific and religious knowledge; people's attitudes towards various illnesses or

accidents; trace element geochemistry; the economics of local government; the weaving of terry towelling; the relationship between language disorder and motor disorder in children; the use of monensin as growth promoter in calves; electrodischarge machining.

(b) There was a regular trickle of requests from the Request Service for information which could not be obtained using existing sources. The policy was not to try and obtain a full bibliography but to obtain where possible a few references on the subject. Consequently the time spent online (average of 14 minutes) was just over half the average for the searches under (a) above; the number of data bases searched numbered about 3 on average per enquiry, ranging from 1 to 8 data bases. The average cost for these enquiries was £8.69, excluding inland phone charges.

(c) A total of 64 enquiries were searched during demonstrations; these were often very valuable to the user who asked the question, but were not always fully researched and prepared as were those in (a) and (b) above.

Training and Information to Staff. Training continued throughout the Operational Phase; initially this was basic training conducted in-house, with regular in-house subject-based sessions later when data bases in a particular subject were looked at more closely. In addition, intermediaries attended more advanced external courses and returned to conduct in-house sessions for the benefit of the other intermediaries on the team. There was no particular attempt to specialise either by system or by data base. The staff involved worked out a rota for searching as, apart from the CIRS Librarian, all the intermediaries were employed full-time on other duties. Staffing can be a problem and any organisation setting up a service needs to be aware of the time necessary for staff to be trained and to have sufficient opportunity to search regularly, both to keep the Service running smoothly and also to keep in practice and not lose touch with searching techniques.

After the demonstrations for librarians in the Preparation Phase, library staff have been kept in touch with the BIROS project and online developments principally by means of a quarterly newsletter 'BIROS News', which seeks to give information about new data bases, the progress of the BIROS Service, data bases in a particular subject area, the edition's 'Prize False-Drop', other developments in the online field.

Research. The main areas of research during the operational period have been: conducting a survey of library users - a survey of the use of the reference services and non-fiction requests in the lending sections of chosen libraries, as a basis for later measuring the impact of the introduction of the online service; interviewing library staff about their attitudes and opinions about BIROS and the online demonstrations; and very important, interviewing users of the BIROS Service to obtain information about the value of the search, and much more useful information. This information in detail will be included in the Report on the project to the British Library Research and Development Department which will be published next year.

6 ASSESSMENT

Up to now 56 enquiries have been followed up by personal interview with the user, and some of the findings are given here. Asked if the results of the search provided sufficient information to satisfy the query, 57% of users replied 'Yes', 18% 'partially', and 19.5% said 'No', with no response from 5.5%. Users were asked to make a judgement as to the value of the search, the replies are given in Table 2.

Table 2

Value of Searches

Value	Percentage
Major	16
Considerable	46.5
Minor	18
Little/no	12.5
No comment	7
	100.00

Some of the main reasons why users thought the search valuable were that it saved time, or that it confirmed the fact that few references had been missed previously, or that the references were a useful addition to those already collected, or that resources were lacking to do a satisfactory manual search.

The first search for most users was free, in line with the Committee's decision mentioned earlier, but ten of those interviewed had paid for the search. These users were asked whether they thought the charges(£5-£10) had been high, low or about right for the information they had received. Four considered these charges to be low, and the other six about right.

All users were told the actual cost of the search and then asked whether they or their organisation would have been willing to pay that amount, which ranged from £4.20 to £39.85; about 46.5% replied in the affirmative, about the same in the negative, and the remainder gave no answer. Many of those who replied 'no' would have paid the amount for the search if the search had been of more value to them.

One question was coined to get some idea of the likely future demand for the Service from those who had already used it. 77% expected to use the Service again (realising that they would be charged for it); 11.5% thought it possible that they might use it while the remaining 11.5% said they would not use it again - in the majority of these cases the reason was because of a change of jobs. If the expected usage materialises, it would appear that there will be a continuing demand for the Service.

7 CONCLUSION

The Library has been able to encourage a large number of people to ask for information of the Library which they probably would not have approached the public library for had not BIROS been available. The Service has clearly been of much value to the great majority of these people. The main problems which have occurred and, hopefully, overcome are in respect of organising the staffing adequately, being sure exactly what the user wants and getting the message across to all potential users. Demonstrations have been found to be a very useful way of getting users interested and involved.

More than one organisation is using the Service on a regular basis, either having made an order for Service over a given period, or having asked for SDI profiles to be run at regular intervals.

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